

# Shrubsteppe

**U**tah's shrubsteppe habitats are rugged, wide expanses of shrubs and grasses.

The name "shrubsteppe" comes from one of the habitat's most abundant plants, sagebrush, and "steppe," which means a large, dry grassland with few or no trees.

Sagebrush is a plant that is closely associated with the American West, and has a long history of connections to both people and wildlife. From Native Americans who used sagebrush in ceremonies,

to mule deer that depend on sagebrush as a key food source in the winter, a diversity of cultures and wildlife species have adapted to use Utah's abundant shrubsteppe habitats.

Unfortunately, shrubsteppe habitats across the state are not as healthy as they once were, and wildlife species are becoming stressed. A variety of human activities are threatening this critically important habitat, and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is working aggressively with its partners, including especially the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development, to address these threats.



## Key Facts about Utah's Shrubsteppe Habitat:

### *Common*

Shrubsteppe habitats cover over 13 percent of Utah's surface, making them among the most abundant habitats in the state.

### *On the Decline*

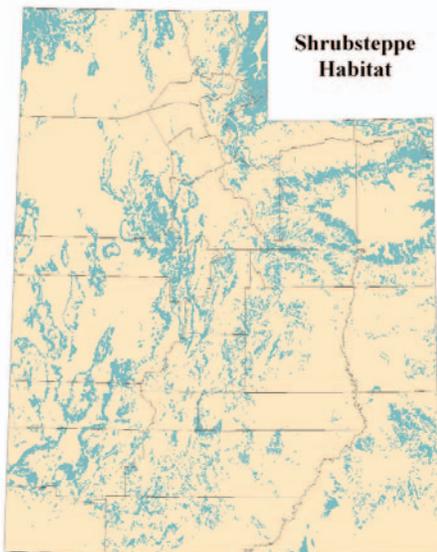
While shrubsteppe areas still remain across the state, they are in poor condition, and sagebrush plants in particular are not as healthy as they once were.

### *Plant Life*

Sagebrush is the most common plant in shrubsteppe habitats, and there are many species of sagebrush in Utah, including: big, black, low, and silver sagebrush. Other plants in this habitat include: bluebunch wheatgrass, needle grass, rabbit brush, juniper, pinyon and mountain mahogany.

### *Animal Life*

Two grouse species, Gunnison and greater sage-grouse, are specially adapted to shrubsteppe habitats. Other species found in the shrubsteppe include pygmy rabbits, sage thrasher, sage sparrow and the olive-backed pocket mouse. Mule deer also are closely connected to shrubsteppe habitats, especially in winter.





Greater sage-grouse

Photo Courtesy of Howie Garber

## Species on the Edge

As native shrubsteppe plant species decline because of a variety of human impacts, it has become increasingly difficult for wildlife to thrive. In all, shrubsteppe habitats are home to 20 species that need conservation, including the following:

### **Tier One—Very High Concern**

Gunnison sage-grouse

### **Tier Two—High Concern**

Greater sage-grouse, pygmy rabbit

### **Tier Three—Moderate Concern**

Sage thrasher, sage sparrow, Brewer’s sparrow, mule deer

## What’s Threatening Utah’s Shrubsteppe?

**Brush Control**—Brush-control activities, designed to reduce fuels for wildfires, can damage shrubsteppe habitats if performed improperly.

**Land development**—Whether it’s to create new housing or shopping opportunities or to accommodate industrial needs, shrubsteppe habitats are being lost to development.

**Energy Development**—The roads, well pads and other developments associated with oil and gas extraction degrade and fragment shrubsteppe habitats.

**Fire Cycle Alteration**—Shrubsteppe habitats depend on periodic fires to stay healthy. Fire control efforts and invasive species have disrupted this natural cycle.

**Improper grazing practices**—Over-grazing threatens shrubsteppe habitats.

**Improper OHV Use**—OHVs that venture off designated trails destroy native plants and disrupt wildlife.

**Invasive Plants**—Non-native plants such as cheatgrass outcompete native plants, making large areas of shrubsteppe uninhabitable for many native species.

## Taking Action

Protecting Utah’s shrubsteppe habitats will require coordinated action among a variety of partners across the state.

### **Conservation Actions**

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has identified the following key actions needed to protect shrubsteppe habitats:

1. Permanently protect certain key shrubsteppe habitats and restore degraded habitats wherever possible.
2. Encourage developers to permanently protect shrubsteppe habitats to offset habitat lost to development.
3. Reintroduce natural fire patterns through prescribed burns and by reducing populations of invasive species.
4. Research and monitor shrubsteppe habitats.
5. Establish partnerships with state and federal agencies and private landowners to address threats to shrubsteppe habitats.
6. Enforce OHV regulations; educate OHV users about the need to appropriately operate their OHVs.
7. Educate the public about Utah’s shrubsteppe habitats and what we can do to manage and protect them.

### **Conservation Partners**

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is working closely with the Utah Farm Bureau, local governments, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources and Conservation Service, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife and others to protect shrubsteppe habitats. In addition, the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development have undertaken a major watershed restoration initiative in shrubsteppe areas across Utah.